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ABSTRACT

For various well-documented reasons, the feminist social movement has been critical of academia as a worksetting and of the social sciences as a set of disciplines. For these reasons, feminists claim that the assumptions underlying several research designs and procedures are sexist. They have developed a feminist methodology to examine these assumptions and advocate certain methods which they believe to be more consistent with feminist principles. This paper defines sexism, feminism, method and methodology in order to illuminate this body of criticism. It then elaborates the different stances taken by feminists in response to the questions: Is there a feminist method? And, if so, what are its characteristics? The three methodological positions taken in response to these questions are explained. These positions are then shown to produce four distinct types of feminist researchers which can be labelled: careerists, adopter/adapters, alternative paradigm developers and triangulators. Definitions of each type are offered and representative literature is cited. In conclusion, the paper notes that feminist methodology is currently pluralistic and that an intense debate is in progress among these positions. (Author/BW)

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Dimensions of the Feminist Research Methodology Debate: Impetus, Definitions, Dilemmas & Stances

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Dimensions of the Feminist Research Methodology Debate:

Impetus, Definitions, Dilemmas, and Stances

Scholarship and science proceed in two ways: by accumulation and by revolution. Revolutions arise from criticism of the discipline or radical innovations in its findings, both of which lead to the emergence of new paradigms (Kuhn, 1962; 1970). Within the social sciences, the knowledge that is produced and displayed in our reports, papers, journals and books reflects both processes. Social science in general, and psychology in particular have a long history of self-criticism. Two well developed perspectives on psychological knowledge which begin with a critique of the dominant paradigm are humanistic psychology and phenomenological psychology. These chart out not only new subject matter for exploration but also new orientations for psychology as a whole.

Feminist concerns with psychology build on this tradition of criticism (Westkott, 1979). As a social movement grounded in dissatisfaction with the status quo, feminism is critical of nearly every aspect of society since every aspect is affected by the dominant culture which can easily be demonstrated to be subtly or blatantly sexist (see US Commission on Civil Rights, 1978). When feminism turns its critical glance on academia in its functions both as work-place and as producer of knowledge, it finds much to complain about. For example, with regard to academia as a worksetting, feminist researchers have produced statistics demonstrating the direct correlation between the under-representation of women and their status level in the university (Welch and Lewis, 1980). These differences are attributable to environmental opportunities and constraints, including differential expectations about the value of women's and men's work (Goldberg, 1968; Hughes, 1973; Mischel, 1974), not to differential competence of men and women. This line of reasoning is supported by examining

the way women's increased representation in positions of power occurs when there are economic and structural changes granting them this opportunity (Rossi and Calderwood, 1973; Graham, 1978; Kilson, 1976).[1] As Sherif put it, "Women are valued more when men are scarce" (1977, p. 96).

Feminist' second critical concern with academia relates not to who has the opportunity to participate, but to how research is done. In particular, the question is raised as to the connection between the content and procedures of research on the one hand, and sexism on the other. Sexism is defined as that set of beliefs and practices which advocates, assumes, or reinforces beliefs and practices which diminish the values, opportunities, respect and safety of females relative to males. The relevance of a political social movement such as feminism to conducting human research is assumed because research is both a social activity and one that attempts to transcend its social imbeddedness through objectivity-enhancing procedures. Political ideology and social research are thus competing claims to truth. Our research and academic industries contribute greatly to public knowledge, education, culture, and policy regarding people's lives. A contamination by sexism of this realm of activity has far-reaching consequences.

Within the area of concern about the research that is done, not the representation of women, feminist questions are manifold. They include how research is funded, which research topics are studied, the uses to which research is put, etc. These questions and others are subsumed under the issue of feminist methodology. To begin to dissect the many components of feminist methodology, it is wise to define some terms. First, although the words "method" and "methodology" are used interchangeably in the literature, and the word "method" has recently been falling into disuse altogether, "method" and

[1] For a discussion of two structural changes within academia suggested to increase opportunities for women interested in becoming community psychologists - mid-career admission and part-time doctoral programs - see Mulvey and Passy, 1981.

"methodology" can be differentiated. Method refers to procedures or techniques used within a research project, or to the general design or approach within which the particular procedure falls (e.g., pre-post testing with control groups, qualitative, etc.). Methodology, on the other hand, refers to the analysis of the methods or procedures themselves, or of the assumptions inherent in these methods, or of the assumptions underlying the whole discipline. Feminist critics are concerned both with sexist and feminist methods and with sexist and feminist methodology.

Similarly, the term "feminist" can have two meanings: it can refer to a person who holds feminist beliefs or acts in accordance with feminist principles, on the one hand; or it can refer to the beliefs or actions themselves, i.e. "feminist" refers either to the person or the ideology. Thus we can generate a simple 2 by 2 cell of 4 possible topics - feminist (as person) method or methodology, and feminist (as ideology or principles) method or methodology. Since feminism refers to an ideology which runs counter to the mainstream ideology, feminist methodological criticism is never simply an attack on the technical merit of a given piece of research but also on its ideological assumptions. Thus, feminist methodological criticism points to the intrinsically interdependent nature of methodology's dual components - techniques and values (see Kamens, 1981).

In actual debates, it is these differences which frequently underlie the confusion and disagreement. For example, much literature can be identified as embodying feminist principles without its author being a self-proclaimed feminist. Whereas non-deliberately sexist literature would still easily qualify as sexist, feminists have difficulty labelling as feminist, material (particularly that of men) which merely overlaps with and does not announce its feminist values. The parallel question is also raised. Should we classify as feminist any and all work produced by someone who is a feminist even if the work is not even remotely

concerned with issues of interest to women? Can a feminist carry out conventional research, or is feminism a form of praxis that demands an alternative set of behaviors in all our activities?

A chart by Graham and Rawlings (1980) of sexist, non-sexist, and feminist research attributes, for example, wisely draws attention to the difference between research which is merely non-sexist and that which is clearly feminist. But their statement as to what feminist research is suggests that feminism demands methodological uniformity. For me, they also point to a possible "feminist backlash" position in which we become so concerned with rejecting anything conventional that we forgo rationality itself. For example, they repudiate the use of statistics and suggest that feminist researchers using statistics insert a note of apology. Whether or not this particular position is acceptable, Graham and Rawlings' very attempt to define feminist research methods raises the question of who has the institutional authority or public legitimacy to make those definitions. Should there be a purist or a heterogeneous approach to feminist research methodology? If feminism is itself a grassroots, pluralistic movement built on participation rather than control, it is unlikely that we will ever achieve consensus about universal feminist methodological guidelines, except for some very basic orientations. For this reason, my intent is not to offer guidelines for feminist research but rather to help clarify the dimensions of the debate so that researchers can make better informed choices.

In order to clarify the discussion of feminist methodology, I propose that the term feminism contains two elements. First is the examination, criticism and repudiation of sexism which excessively differentiates inherent male and female traits, asssumes superiority of males over females, and provides the two groups with different opportunities and obligations. Second is advocacy of either equity between male and female, or development of a new culture in

which there would be not only equity in current cultural terms but also change of the terms themselves. These two definitions of feminism - the critical and the creative - are underlying divergent themes in the formulation of feminist methodology. Thus, feminist methodology refers either to feminist criticism of conventional methods (e.g., Johnson, 1978) or to advocacy of alternative or feminist methods (e.g., Di Iorio, 1980; Reinharz, 1979; 1981 & in press). Similarly, in the feminist social service domain there is a division between those who focus on exposing ways in which women are damaged and those who focus rather on creating alternative settings in which women will not be damaged. The exact nature of the creative approach varies from making small modifications within traditional procedures to a more radical revision of research which houses feminist research in a feminist counterculture replete with feminist funding, teams and publication outlets (e.g., see Rubin and Friedensohn, 1981).

The debate about feminist methodology is complicated by another philosophic problem which arises whenever a discussion challenges the framework which subsumes the challenge itself. This is the problem of circularity, an example of which is the familiar paradoxical statement, "I always lie." If a person always lies, then the very statement announcing that habit would also be a lie and therefore could not communicate its intended message. Similarly, if social institutions and contemporary culture are completely suffused with sexism or patriarchy, then it is not possible, even for feminists, to have a non-sexist thought, and therefore our very discussions about feminist methodology simply reflect traps laid by our sexist culture. In this view, feminism itself can be dangerous to women because it is not free of its patriarchal environment. This seems to be the position reached lately by Evelyn Fox-Keller (1980). She warns feminists that avoiding what is currently seen as the hard, masculine disciplines and methods is a backward move into which we seduce ourselves by

mistakenly buying into the patriarchically defined division of cognitive styles.

Another overarching position among feminist methodologists rests not on the argument of circularity but of reduction. This position eliminates the concern with means and advocates a concern only for ends. In this view, feminist research is defined as that research which furthers the interests of women, no matter what means or methods are used to conduct that research. In fact, the more closely research methods conform to whatever convinces the public, policy makers, or other targeted sectors, the more they should be used. Good feminist research, in this view, is that research which is guided by concerns of the feminist movement, employs members of the movement, and has the widest dissemination and utilization record because it uses the most acceptable methods (Ehrlich, 1976). Thus, the three methodological positions described above might be paraphrased as the following:

1) Since science or academia is historically and inherently patriarchal, we must get out or work to criticize and change the assumptions about how knowledge should be produced; only by doing this can we change our culture;
2) Thinking that science and academia are patriarchal is a patriarchal trap - therefore stay in, prove you are just as good as anyone else, gain positions of power and serve as a role model; only by doing this can we change our culture;
3) Ignore the above, just use whatever resources you can in order to do research helpful to women; only by doing this can we change our culture.

The methodological stances described in the preceding pages translate into at least four distinct types of feminist researchers: these are the careerists, the adopters/adapters, the alternative paradigm developers, and the triangulators. A fifth type, the professional methodologist, is usually

simultaneously an alternative paradigm developer. Briefly, the careerist is a person who believes that the best service she can provide women is to excel in her field by its own standards and thus change the expectations others might have about women's achievements. Sometimes such women play by the rules of the game until they achieve sufficient professional security; only later do they become more overtly feminist in their work. The problem with this position is that it can easily lose sight of its political implications and can degenerate into mindless driven and even self-destructive behavior. Perhaps Janet Cooke of Pulitzer Prize infamy is an example.

The second group, adopters/adapters, are probably the majority of feminist researchers. They believe that research is either good or poor. Research which is sexist is poor, and once the sexism is removed, conventional research can be good. In psychological experiments, for example, they believe that once the near-exclusive use of men as subjects was exposed as a blindspot, then researchers can be expected to learn to use both male and female subjects and learn to make appropriate inferences from the collected data (Signorella, Vegega and Mitchell, in press). This expectation rests on the belief that no rational social scientist would want to be sexist if s/he had the choice (for a contrary view, see Sherif, 1977). Adopters/adapters believe that although research methods are possibly tinged with sexism here and there, the contamination is not so extensive that it cannot be repaired with some deliberate, but manageable alteration. Unlike the careerists, the adopters/adapters might be on the lookout for sexism in research, but their commitment to conventional research strategies leads to their belief that sexism can be easily eliminated from research by minor modifications such as those contained in guidelines issued by professional organizations. They are able to integrate the value-free stance of objectivist research with the value-explicit stance of feminist research.

The third group, the alternative paradigm developers, starts with a concern about the very nature of social research. Somewhat less significant for them is serving as a successful role model, the use to which research is put, the likelihood of developing prestigious careers, or the perpetuation of historic research traditions. They are fascinated instead by the grounds on which research proceeds, why it is conducted as it is, how these procedures relate to our culture, and what sort of world view research provides us with. They are not enraptured by the record and promise of science as we have known it. Given this preoccupation with the meaning underlying conventional research activities, they suggest alternatives to these conventions. Most of these alternatives, both in psychology and sociology, have been within the domain of qualitative strategies which permit greater intimacy between researcher and participants. Given names such as "experiential analysis" (Reinharz, 1979; 1981), feminist phenomenology (Paget, in press; Di Iorio, 1980), oral history (Seifer, 1976) and ethnography (Spradley and Mann, 1975), these methods usually involve collaboration between a researcher and a small number of persons who explore at length in an unstructured way the meaning of a certain event or feeling (Kramer and Masur, 1976; Millman, 1980; Borg and Lasker, 1981). Occasionally these new strategies are linked with more conventional ones, as in the case of Boukydis (1981) who uses phenomenology to identify important phenomena about which she then develops testable hypotheses. Sometimes this research strategy is criticized as non-analytic, journalistic, and merely descriptive rather than explanatory. On the other hand, this position, more than others, is truly meta-disciplinary, drawing on the humanities, popular media and numerous social science disciplines.

The underlying, although not often expressed, belief among the alternative paradigm developers is that we have to proceed with great caution when attempting to understand other women because so much of their language and behavior when

examined in conventional ways will elicit mere stereotypes and clichés (Friedland and Kort, 1981). By starting with the women themselves, we will be informed as to what to study and will not be confined to stereotypic thinking. In alternative research, explication of women's experience as it is truly experienced is the goal. Any technique or arrangement which enhances our ability to reach that understanding and communicate it accurately should be used (Smith, 1974). Women researchers have unique access to women's lives and are foolish to encumber themselves with distancing methods. All of these strategies fall within the rubric of a paradigm for a social science that is an alternative to the one built only on men's image of the world and of behavior (Abu-Lughod, n.d.; Weisstein, 1971).

Finally, the triangulationists are the combiners. They believe that the best research strategy is one which uses multiple means so as to create richness, balance and internal checks. They are more interested in means than in ends, and consider methodological problems to be primarily technical, not ideological. Triangulation is a frequently suggested but infrequently implemented strategy (Jick, 1979). Most of us, unfortunately, are not so multiply talented or so adept at creating cooperative teams of variously skilled persons that we can effectively combine multiple strategies into one coherent whole. Nor is it always possible to use multiple methods on the same population - sometimes these methods are mutually exclusive because of the relationships that have been established in the study site.

The question of what feminist research methods and methodology are is debated vigorously among these positions. Neither the positions themselves, nor anyone's adherence to a particular position is static, however. Rather they are in rapid transition as new dilemmas become apparent (Reinharz, in press), and there are increasing opportunities for us to meet and speak with one another, or to publish our thoughts and teach our ideas. It is probably also true that

for each female researcher, particular personal experiences become salient in shaping her research method and methodological choices. Sometimes the influence of these formative experiences are in a realm removed from rational argumentation. For myself, the perpetuation of this debate among the positions outlined above and the dialectic energy it creates are the most significant element of feminist methodology.

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